



On the Romanticism Style in the Musical Creation of Rachmaninoff

ZHANG Xuan^{[a],*}

^[a]Associate Professor, School of Music, Shandong Normal University, Jinan, China.

*Corresponding author.

Received 22 March 2015; accepted 7 May 2015

Published online 26 June 2015

Abstract

This paper analyzes the romanticism style of Rachmaninoff. First, we analyze the formation of the composer's romanticism style from his lifetime, then analyze the romanticism mood of his works from two aspects of his feelings expression and musical characteristics, and at last, analyze in combination with some concrete samples of his works to strive to have a good understanding of his romanticism style.

Key words: Rachmaninoff; Romanticism; Feelings; Musical characteristics

Zhang, X. (2015). On the Romanticism Style in the Musical Creation of Rachmaninoff. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 11(6), 107-110. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/7125>
 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/7125>

INTRODUCTION

Sergei Vassilievitch Rachmaninoff (1873-1943), the famous pianist and conductor in the twentieth century, is a controversial classical music composer. The teaching materials and music criticism for the western music history of early twentieth century do not think much of his music achievements. The music history work *A History of Western Music* by Donald Jay Grout, an American scholar, is composed of 986 pages, but in the book, there are only two sentences about the contents of works of Rachmaninoff; there is even no introduction on the music of Rachmaninoff in the music history masterpiece *Music in Western Civilization* by American musician Paul Henry

Lang. In the *Grove's Dictionary of Music* published in 1954, the comments on the works of Rachmaninoff are shown as follows: "He will not attract much attention as his compositions are artificial and factitious."

However, as of the 1980s, along with the regression of romanticism music style, the works of Rachmaninoff yield unusually brilliant results just like the pearls from an old wrecked ship that has been just salvaged. The intensive notes, gorgeous grace notes, and sonorous chords all throw off dreamy romantic colors.

1. CREATION PROCESS OF RACHMANINOFF

Rachmaninoff was born in a wealthy landlord's house in Russia on April 1, 1873. There was a good music environment in his family, and his mother is a graduate of Saint Petersburg Conservatory, from whom Rachmaninoff received the piano education in the earliest time. In 1889, Rachmaninoff entered the Moscow Conservatory, and since then, he began receiving more stringent, standard and systematic education and training, and was guided by the musicians such as Rubinstein and Tchaikovsky successively, which brought in very important influences on his creation at the later time. Rachmaninoff was first active in the international music circles as a pianist in the earlier time. He integrated the advantages of predecessors of pianists in instrumental performance, created his own unique performance style, and became one of the few outstanding pianists in the world at that time. However, his happy lives did not last for a long time, the declination of family, the early death of elder sister, and the leaving of his father caused serious hurts to the heart of Rachmaninoff, and his cause was subjected to larger frustration thereupon. In the meanwhile, the society in Russia in the earlier 20th century was in turmoil, and the outbreak of revolution made Rachmaninoff forced to leave his native places and unable to return to his motherland. The Ups and downs

of life caused psychological trauma to Rachmaninoff, but at the same time, such unique personal experience all provided driving forces for his creation, and also set the tone for the deep feelings in his works.

2. OVERALL CARDING OF ROMANTICISM WORKS OF RACHMANINOFF

The romance song refers to a kind of short lyric songs or short music without fixed forms in general, enjoying the widest popularity in the folk of France in the second half of 18th century and in Russia in the middle of 19th century. It places particular emphasis on the human's inward world, with strong expressive force of tune. The Russian romance song is always being unique by its sincerity and simplicity, and it becomes an ideological trend of the era as a unique "standard". Rachmaninoff is the last composer in the history who conducts music creation in the form of romanticism style, as well as being the completer of romantic tradition.

Rachmaninoff has created 83 romantic works in total all his life. Such romantic works have deep Russian national style, with lingering and fair-sounding melody, and being full of deep love on the life and the nation. It is worth mentioning that the melody of *At the Gates of the Holy Cloister* was composed by Rachmaninoff when he was just in his 16 years old, which sufficiently shows that the romanticism passion was profoundly embedded into his heart from childhood. In his later works, we can feel his intense and lofty expression of feelings, as well as the sentiments full of charms.

Many researchers divide the romantic works of Rachmaninoff into four classes mainly by resorting to the contents. First, the first class of works is themed by sad and sentimental mood, with the representative works including *I Fell in Love*, *To My Sorrow*, *A Dream* and *Night is Sorrowful*. Such works mainly are ones created in the middle and later periods of his life, and at that time, his music style had already been in the pink of perfection. The sad tone in such works has a direct connection with his rugged life, and such works bring about mysterious and gloomy feelings to the audiences, forming the peakedness of Rachmaninoff's works under the combination of emotion and skills. Second, the second class of works is themed by love, e.g., *Again you are Bestirred*, *my Heart*, *Oh No*, *I Beg You*, *Do Not Leave!*, etc.. Such songs are of soothing lyric music with sincere feelings and exquisite and pleasant melody, conveying the feelings of romance and freedom. Besides, his works of describing the nature can be grouped as the third class. Such works are rich in flavors of Russian traditional folk songs with sweet and circuitous tune, embodying the composer's love on the nature. *Lilacs*, *Twilight* and *Spring Torrents* are all belong to this class of works. At the end, the fourth class of works is mainly to describe the people's

life scenes, and the works such as *The Rat-Catcher*, *Oh Thou, my Field* and *My Child, Your Beauty is That of a Flower* all belong to this class.

3. THE ROMANTIC EMOTIONAL PURSUIT IN RACHMANINOFF'S WORKS

3.1 Religious Emotion and Romantic Color

As Rachmaninoff was deeply influenced by the religious music from childhood, therefore, he always insists on that "How can the art be divorced from the religion?.....The religion is to believe a kind of theory, yet in my opinion, the art lives on feelings rather than the faith, and so does the religion." (Alannofsky, 2005, p.125) In the heart of Rachmaninoff, the religion does not only refer to the religious beliefs, but also refer to a kind of feeling, soul belonging and sustenance.

Look from the overall characteristics of romantism music, the secularization of religious works is an important feature of romantism music style. Through analyzing Rachmaninoff's works, we can find that among the more than forty works, there are over 10 songs in possession of the melody of *Dies Irae*, approximately accounting for one third of his all works.

In addition, the "rings" that are commonly heard in the Russian Orthodox Cathedral run through various works of Rachmaninoff, and although are given in different expressions by him. At the same time, the melody of Rachmaninoff's works often appears with solemn, serene, and elegant chords, which is largely in common with the melody of anthems of Orthodox Church. The unceasing introduction of such religious impressions, and the imitation and re-creation of the religious tune style shapes the unique romanticism style characteristics of Rachmaninoff.

3.2 The Dream of Mind and the Romantic Color

Rachmaninoff has been influenced by the ideological trend of symbolism. The symbolism emphasizes to build up a fine society in fantasy and to achieve its own ideal in the virtual, which in itself is embodied with profound romantic color.

Rachmaninoff's works exactly show his inner magnificent fantasy and wonderful visions, and such romantic color based on the dream of mind becomes more mysterious and profound. Rachmaninoff's creation is dominated by the expression of feelings, in pursuit of free, spiritual and pure creation, and striving to exploit the fine and smooth feelings in the mind. He integrates the description of fine blueprint in his mind into the music composition in combination with his own life experience and imagination in the mind. His works adopt the elegant and slightly sad tune that is full of Russia style, being deep, bright and clear, gentle, and happy now and then.

Unlike many other romantic works, the expression of feelings in Rachmaninoff's works is always diametrically opposite yet intermeshed. The expression of feelings like melancholy, joyfulness, worry, excitement, etc. in his works is all very distinctive. Under the influences of such characteristics, his works seem floating in-between the positive and negative worlds, carrying with special colors. This is the perfect combination of Rachmaninoff's ideal and reality.

3.3 Poetic Illusion and the Romantic Color

If we find out one term to summarize the theme of Rachmaninoff's works, then the right one shall be of "poetic illusion". The ideological trend of symbolism initially finds expression in the literature and poetry fields, and then expands to the music field via the said two fields. Rachmaninoff was deeply subjected to the ideological trend of symbolism in the process of composing music for poets of symbolism.

Rachmaninoff has expressed his own creation process as follows:

When I am composing, I often think of a piece of article or a poetry that I have read not long ago, which can help me a lot. Their feelings resound in my mind, I strive to turn them into notes, and it is them that open the door of my inspiration.....I find that, if there are any non-music objects for me to describe, then I will be burst of new ideas. (Ibid., p.104)

From these words, it can be observed that Rachmaninoff's works are the musicalization of poetry and literature, therefore, it is quite literally to say that his works carry with poetic illusions.

Such romance with poetic illusions can be observed from the name of work as well. The works such as *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, *The Isle of the Dead*, *Caprice Bohémien*, *Spring*, and *Morceaux de fantaisie* all provide the audiences with open space of imagination. Only the titles can let the people to linger in the realm of poetic romance.

4. MUSIC ANALYSIS WITH *RHAPSODY ON A THEME OF PAGANINI* AS AN EXAMPLE

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini is one of the most important works of Rachmaninoff, and even if all the music of Rachmaninoff is forgot by the world, then the only one remaining is *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*. Many music lovers know Rachmaninoff via this piece of work, and then get in touch with his other works. Wherein, an andante (Var.18) wins universal praise, and has been included as background music by the movie *Somewhere in Time*.

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini was wrote in 1934, and at that time, significant changes were happening in the music circles of the world where the traditional tonal

system, musical form, rhythm, and other idiomatic music methods are abandoned, and replaced with "new music" of various schools. The atonality music, expressionism, post-Romanticism, neo-classicism, twelve-tone technique, and so on appeared in succession, and "Seeking special sounds in new music" became the trend of the times in western music. However, Rachmaninoff remained unmoved, and still sought for the expression of individuality in the style and form of the nineteenth century.

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini was created at the mature stage of Rachmaninoff, and at that time, the romanticism style of Rachmaninoff had been clearly shaped. This piece of work can fully embody his composing characteristics, and represent the abundant imagination and enthusiastic music style.

4.1 Analysis of Content Innovation

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini to the large extent sources from *24 Caprices for solo violin*, the work of Italian famous musician Paganini. Rachmaninoff used the music theme of *24 Caprices for solo violin*, and rewrote it into single movement piano music and band music in the form of variations. The work structure is complex but nature without any contrived traces, and it is composed of a short and small prelude, two variations, and the epilogue. The work is grand and magnificent, and complex and profound, and adopts epic magnificent scenes to give full play of the characteristics of rhapsody. Such composition form is the important innovation of Rachmaninoff, and in comparison with the traditional creation methods, it provides refreshing feelings to the audiences. Therefore, it becomes the inimitable art of romanticism music virtuoso school in the 19th century.

This piece of work adopted the method of cooperative playing by the piano and the orchestra, which was initiated during The Romantic Period. As the last representative figure of romanticism, Rachmaninoff inherited this method. At the same time, he also had his own innovation. He integrated the playing of piano fully into the band, made the piano as a musical instrument of the band, but highlighted the leading role of piano, thus achieving the exquisite, balanced and integral effects. One researcher evaluates that "Rachmaninoff's concerto contains various highly difficult techniques, but not the simple demonstration of skills, and his skills flow naturally out in the course of entirely reasonable progressing." (Wang, 2011)

4.2 Analysis of Melody Characteristics

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini shows the individual style of composer with resplendent techniques, however, the most memorable things in the work are not the dazzling techniques but his melody characteristics. Rachmaninoff is adept in applying the chord recitative and octave overlapping in the climax. Such technique of expression is extremely enthusiastic, and can push the emotion of piano playing to the peak. Besides, in

his works, the climax of melody is processed not in the traditional way, but it is made to gradually climb up to the climax, maintain for a period of time, and then slowly descend, with the emotion weakening gradually thereupon. This characteristic has occurred for many times in the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, with a longer melody line. In the slow 18th variation, the entire rhapsody suddenly slows down here, playing a simple and lyric tune, the melody of which is bright, beautiful, and breath-taking. Of course, the unfailing "Russian melancholy" is implied thereinto. This melody is first sung out at the piano, plain and gentle, and then the piano gives way to the string music, with the enthusiasm gradually increasing, soon afterwards growing into a romantic and passionate ode.

4.3 Analysis of Harmony Characteristics

In the aspect of harmony application, Rachmaninoff is fully deserved to be called as an outstanding master musician. In his times, significant development and reform were taking place in the harmony style and techniques, various new harmony methods broke through the constraints of tonality and structure, and the avant-garde techniques presented the situation of flourishing like the mushrooms after rain. Under the background of the era, Rachmaninoff can be considered as a musician sticking to the tradition, he still insisted on adopting the traditional function of tonal harmony and the tertian chords as his own fundamental creation techniques. However, he also made subtle innovations in the details. In his works, the color of harmony was richened on the basis of functional harmony, and such colorful harmony makes Rachmaninoff's works very attractive. Such harmony techniques combining the tradition and the modern play a good role of foiling in the processing of melody, and at most times, the advance and drop of climax are produced under the foiling and pushing of harmony.

Among Rachmaninoff's harmony techniques, it is common to make some changes on the basis of sustained tone. Such technique will bring about a kind of new listening pleasure to the appreciators-the centre of temporary tune is not clear any longer as for frequent changes, thus giving complex, rich, but full and methodic feelings to the audiences. In addition, such unceasing changes make the people to feel a kind of unrest factor that seems stable in the surface but is restless inside, which intensifies the sense of tension inside chords, thus fully conveying the inner contradiction and conflicts,

and producing very strong artistic appeal. Moreover, the application of the same tonic, the modulation with the same major and minor tunes, and other techniques also are very common, which makes the contrast of harmony more intense, further greatly enhancing the color of harmony.

As the last representative figure of romanticism music, Rachmaninoff's works truly reveal his own fine fantasy under the influences of symbolism. Rachmaninoff strives to express the thoughts and feelings of a sincere and loyal ordinary person in the music, and endeavors to explore the methods that facilitate all persons to understand. Looking from this, he can be called as the immediate successor of Tchaikovsky. At the same time, the Russian folk song traditions absorbed by him make his works filled with depression, showing the distinctive national temperament. His music often possesses factors such as fantasy and tragic sadness, and frequently leaves indelible traces of inner tragedy, and such profound lyricism and theatricality are also the factors that make his works close to those of Tchaikovsky. Unlike Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff's works are often restricted to express inherent spiritual experience of individuals with narrower scope of contents, but the expressions are very touching and poetic. Rachmaninoff is a genius melody writer, his music is full of beautiful melody, and such melody writings have close links with the slow songs among Russian folk songs. All of these constitute the sources of heart-warming forces in Rachmaninoff's music. In the later period of Rachmaninoff, the characteristics of his works in aspects of musical form, melody, chord, etc., become even more unique, with complex and changeable rhythms and uncoordinated tunes, yet which does not interfere with the artistic achievements of Rachmaninoff at all, and on the contrary, from such romantic and free techniques, we see his fighting against the destiny, his revelation of the truth of life, and his infinite longing for beautiful life.

REFERENCES

- Alannofsky, M. (Ed.). (2005). *Russian composers and the 20th century* (p.125, 104). In H. M. Zhang et al. (Trans.). Beijing, China: Central Conservatory of Music Press.
- Wang, Y. (2011). *Emotion theory of romanticism music from rachmaninoff's romance songs* (Master dissertation). East China Normal University.